



TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The Power of Empathy

Empathy for others doesn't necessarily lead them to change their behavior, but it does help you better navigate difficult situations.

By *Elena Aguilar*

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A particular student was driving me crazy. During most of the fall, she'd storm into my final period every day, slam her backpack on a desk, and shout that she hated my class, wasn't stupid, and didn't belong in the class (eighth-grade reading intervention). She refused to do anything, and skirted the border of being disruptive. Week after week, I'd try to connect with her (I'll call her T.), but she put up a big wall around herself. In response, I felt myself closing up. What I honestly thought was: "You're going to be difficult. Fine. I don't care either, just be quiet."

Then in early winter, a little incident helped me find a wellspring of empathy for T. And what I learned was that cultivating empathy for others—for my students, colleagues, supervisors—helped *me* feel better. It helped me have more energy. It helped me manage challenges.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Often discussed as something that we might do (or perhaps should do) to be a good person, feeling empathetic helps us make connections with others and understand them better. It's different from having sympathy for someone, which means to look at their suffering from the outside and feel sorry or sad for them. Empathy is feeling someone else's pain or seeing through their eyes. It's also a precursor to compassion, which is empathy in action—a commitment to doing something that relieves someone else's suffering.

But here's another reason to foster empathy for others: Experiencing empathy can make your own life better. Empathy can open your heart, letting in more feelings, but also softening some of the tough

experiences. As we build empathy for others, we understand them more and can connect with them differently, which boosts our resilience—the ability to bounce back after challenges.

Here's what happened with T. I asked students to do a quick write-in response to this prompt: "If a genie could grant you one wish, what would it be?" T. wrote about a genie who would buy her new clothes. She wrote about how she was growing out of her clothes, and her family didn't have money, and she was ashamed to come to school every day in pants that she knew didn't fit and bursting out of her shirts. She'd had a major growth spurt, she wrote, and all she wanted were clothes that fit.

"What must that be like," I thought, "for a 13-year-old-girl?" I remembered my own early adolescence. I imagined myself in her clothes. I felt some of what I imagined she might feel.

I wrote back a short message communicating empathy. She responded and told me about her sick grandma and her mother who was developmentally disabled. I wrote back. She responded and shared more. She still came into class with a temper, but it dissipated much quicker. And I noticed that her temper didn't trigger me as much, that I actually smiled genuinely at her, and that I could authentically say, "It's nice to see you today."

Empathy for others doesn't always lead them to change their behaviors—and we can't expect it to. We can only hope that in exploring the rough terrain of empathy within ourselves, we can learn more about others and ourselves.

AN EMPATHY EXERCISE

There are many ways we can cultivate empathy for others. Here's one activity to try: Identify someone who bothers you, who you are having a difficult time with. This could be a student, a colleague, or a boss. Discreetly attempt to take a photo with your phone of the person's shoes. If you can't do this, then pay attention to their shoes and make a mental note of them, or even create a sketch.

Throughout the course of the day, imagine being in this person's shoes. Use whatever knowledge you have about them to imagine them putting on their shoes in the morning, getting to school, going through their day, leaving school at the end of the day, going home, and so on. At the end of the day, record your reflections. What was the experience like? How did you feel? How did your thoughts and feelings about the other person shift?

Empathy is about opening your heart. I know that this can feel difficult, but I also know that our hearts can hold a lot. Teachers have many opportunities to do this, and developing empathy as a practice can actually make our work as educators easier.

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